

DREAMS



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Dreams

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Letter from the Editor

I have a recurring dream about a boy I went to elementary school with. I haven't spoken to him in nearly two decades, but he sits across from me at an airport restaurant, and walks with me through the park, and eats an ice cream cone, laughing at me when I can't decide on chocolate or vanilla, telling me "Get both."

Sometimes I think that my dreams are trapped in the hallway outside of my childhood bedroom. Every now and then, I jiggle the handle on the locked door, slide my fingers underneath the crack of the doorframe, nails scraping against the hardwood floor, hoping I will finally reach them. I wake up and they've disappeared, seeped back through the walls and the floor and out through the holes in my brain, like a half-formed memory I can't quite seem to place.

I find myself surrounded by dreams, a complicated web of gossamer threads, almost invisible except when inspected under the right light. I am scared of them. I spend so much time sweeping them to the side and ducking under them, trying my best to not get tangled in the sticky tendrils of what could be. And they are weighing me down, weaving themselves into my hair and into the holes of my favorite threadbare Harley Davidson t-shirt I never want to take off. But I still pull them out at night when I'm alone in my room and pour over them. Letting myself wonder what could be—what I could be—if I slipped into my dreams like they could be real.

When I first sat down to edit *Dreams*, I was overwhelmed. Ghost Girls has grown so much in the past year and I am so thankful, but part of me wondered if I bit off more than I could chew with this issue, as it is nearly triple the length of our first issue, *Body*. As I started re-reading each piece, like a lock sliding into

place, *Dreams* began to take shape, a twisting, confusing web of desire, heartbreak, and horror, all knotted together with shimmering gold string.

I wanted reading this issue to feel like a dream, those moments our subconscious tells us all of the things we don't listen to—can't listen to—when we're awake, and how our dreams often shift from sweet, to terrifying, to playful, to otherworldly from moment to moment. It's that dream space, with our consciousness pushed out of the way, that is the most fascinating and most confusing. *Dreams* vividly expresses the breadth of those emotions and experiences, revealing the technicolor landscapes of falling in love, to the paralyzing fear of the recurring nightmare you can't seem to shake, to opening the door to that well-guarded place inside of you, that you only fall into when you're asleep. Editing this issue has been a pleasure and an honor, and I am so thankful to all of the contributors who made it possible.

Dreams don't always make sense. They don't have to. And as I grow and stretch and fall apart and try, desperately, wildly to figure out how to wrap my hands around my own dreams, I am learning to embrace that confusion. I'd like to think that every dream means something, holds some secret message about who we are and what we desire, but maybe they only exist to remind us to savor the moments we are awake. After all, as Siena wrote about her piece, anatomy of what it takes to dream, "It is good to dream, but better to spend your life awake."

Dreamily,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kristin Dillard". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kristin" written in a more compact, stylized manner and the last name "Dillard" written in a more open, flowing script.

Founding Editor of Ghost Girls

phantom

by Mel Tang

tell me
about that dream you
had. the one where sun
rays turn us
to shattered glass, to prisms spitting
sunlight everywhere, everywhere. the one
where i say what i
feel and am not scared
afterward. where we are both
of us in arms
reach, tangible, touchable, untouchable all
at once, and it feels
good. where there is always another
bite to eat, a hand
to hold, a laugh to
burst, unfettered, from your
chest, into mine. where
i don't have to
tell you that i
have never known
a love that makes
me feel this
small, because you already
know. where i don't
have to say that i
miss you the same
way i would miss an

amputated limb, your
absence a phantom pain wringing
through my nervous
system, because you
never left
in the first place.
tell me
you understand.
tell me
you feel
the same.

Afterimage

by K.R.

When the doctor asks me how I'm sleeping
I say "Fine"
not just because I like the feel of the word in my mouth
but because at the end of the day
is this not the truth? Is this not reality?
At night I curl under a blanket and I sleep not like the dead
but like the ancient, like a stone
at the bottom of a stream.
I sleep as though in prayer and I swear
somewhere there are gods running down a hallway screaming holy delight.

No, it is not the sleeping but the aftermath—
the gut-kick panic of waking to discover
I'm choking myself accidentally with my sheets.
Then the heavy crawl awake, mouth thick and filmy,
the room turned unfamiliar and empty despite being home.
Later in the day it's the slow recall—
I'm folding laundry and suddenly remember
my teeth falling out, or the roof collapsing.
I'm washing dishes and my childhood cat rubs up against my legs.
Perhaps worst are the abstract ones, the ones
I can't quite recall but I have a reaction to nonetheless—
I drive by a river and I flinch; I'm cleaning the shower drain
and indefinable dread floods me.

They are all dreams that keep me company, in their way,
little daytime haunts in my rafters, imploring me
that perhaps if I am sleeping well
is not the answer to an unasked question.

Vulnerability

by Meredith Bass



Searching for boys to love

by Delilah Brumer

I inexplicably seek out a
knows every scene in Star Wars type of boy,
codes in Python and Java type of boy,
mansplains aerodynamics while we rock climb type of boy,
Harry Potter meets frat guy on spring break type of boy,
the type of boy who smells of damp metal lunch tables and intelligence that
I will never emulate.

I choose them, a survival instinct kind of choice,
an unnatural natural selection.
daddy longlegs have survived for 300 million years and these boys have the
same physique.
they never notice me and I'd like to keep it that way
my crushes can keep hiding when they are only attractive because they
know 150 digits of pi.

she's a fireball-shaped hair type of girl,
scribbles sonnets better than Shakespeare type of girl,
needs my help in chemistry type of girl,
grins at me during a presentation so I fumble type of girl,
the type of girl who makes me pace around my kitchen as my ribs explode.

I never would've fathomed choosing her.
she is not comfortable.
I should hide from her,
but she is not a choice.

Letter Found in Empty Shoebox

by Emlyn Meredith Dornemann

When I woke up from my last dream about you, I found my bed was covered in straw the same yellow-brown as your hair, which I know from your Facebook pictures isn't straight anymore, but shaggy and curly. I hope that doesn't sound creepy.

This has been happening for a while. Probably since seventh grade when your dad got mean and tricky, but you didn't notice, even when he said you couldn't talk to me anymore. Then I changed schools and only ever saw you when our little sisters' volleyball teams played each other in tournaments. I'd look across the court at you and we'd make eye contact and you'd always look away first.

In these dreams, we're always friends. In these dreams, we always know what happened, but we don't ever talk about it. We never talk about your tricky dad or the volleyball games. In these dreams, we moved past that a long time ago. In these dreams, we've been back together for a while, and our friendship feels like a mended thread and less like one that snapped in one quick yank. It's the only recurring dream I've ever had. Besides the ones where I relive pulling out my baby teeth and it's so vivid that I can feel my mouth filling up with blood, but those dreams don't leave me waking in tears and a bed of straw, so they're not super relevant.

Like I said, I've been having these dreams for years, and I've always scooped the straw off my bed and dumped it into garbage bags that I stuff into my closet. I've taken these bags with me everywhere I've lived. I filled two while I still lived in the sunshine-yellow room where we used to jump on my bed and play Star Wars. I kept having the dreams through undergrad,

even though our sisters had graduated and there were no more volleyball tournaments. I still had enough dreams that I filled about a bag per year, to the point where I moved into my first apartment and I was stuffing eight, nine, ten bags into my hall closet.

I taught myself to spin yarn a few months ago. This guy at the State Fair decided to teach me when he saw I was interested in the spindles he had for sale. I bought an old, used drop spindle and supplemented his teachings with YouTube and Pinterest. There's this thing called art yarn, and it's pretty much this idea that you can make anything into yarn, like cassette tapes or old flowers or a box of grenade pins. I thought about these bags of straw in my closet, and I wondered if I could spin it all into gold like that old fairytale. It took a whole garbage bag of straw splinters in my fingers for me to figure it out, but I got there, spinning and winding the glittery, solid gold yarn onto my little drop spindle.

This shoebox is the other nine bags. Isn't it amazing what all that shrinks down to? All that time taking up space in my closet when I could have made it shoebox size this whole time.

I wanted you to have this. It feels right being yours. I hope I'll get the chance to make more anyway.

The Island of Art

by Ligia Camolesi



Quenched

by Amber Aspinall

I keep dreaming
of walking into pubs
where the people will talk to me
as soon as I enter
and all I ever want to drink
is company

maybe a Coke too
I want to be sweet and dance on their tongues
enough energy flowing between us
that I'll stay up and not crash
too soon

In my dreams I'm a tune
that rings around the town
and people always answer
with a smile,
or a question
I'm awake
I'm awake

Songstress

by C.M. Gigliotti

Her bright hair brushes her waist,
her hands have known sickness.
She waits in the dim caverns of subways
with lowered eyes and lifted guitar.
Anyone foolish enough to touch
her will never be the same.

Since I was sixteen it's been the same
situation: the contours of my waist
ache for more than thoughtless touch,
desire festers, a sweet sickness.
I'm taken by the guitar;
I've taken to dreaming of subways.

There's magic in the subways
beneath Chelsea, not the same
sort of magic on the streets—in the guitar
and its lonely shimmer, as one waist
is pressed to another inside the sickness-
incubating shuttle, crawling with a thousandfold touch.

She is the one I want to touch
in the moon-shadowed stations of subways,
the one who can soften my sickness
and sharpen it at the same
time with a twist of that waist
and a glassy chord from that guitar.

She is rarely without her guitar.
Other things and people she will touch
with hesitation, but this instrument at her waist
puts the world in her hands. All the subways
in the world could not contain her sound, the selfsame
strums that signify liberty and lovesickness.

For me the sweetest sickness
would be the duty to listen to her guitar
forever, to be bound to hear the same
songs for eternity. Oh, to touch
her curtain of hair in empty subways.
Oh, to wrap an arm around her waist.

Her waist brushes mine in the subways
of my mind; she holds a guitar in hands I want to touch
me everywhere. The same symptoms of a beautiful sickness.

I sit at the station.

by Lorelei Bacht

I am birthed by other dreamers
who bend and whisper to me: *this*
gold is only the beginning,

and there are many rooms. lucid
is another word for walking around
asking *is this? is this?* notice

your hands. retrace how you got to
this parking lot. are these your shoes?
an address or a telephone? marvel:

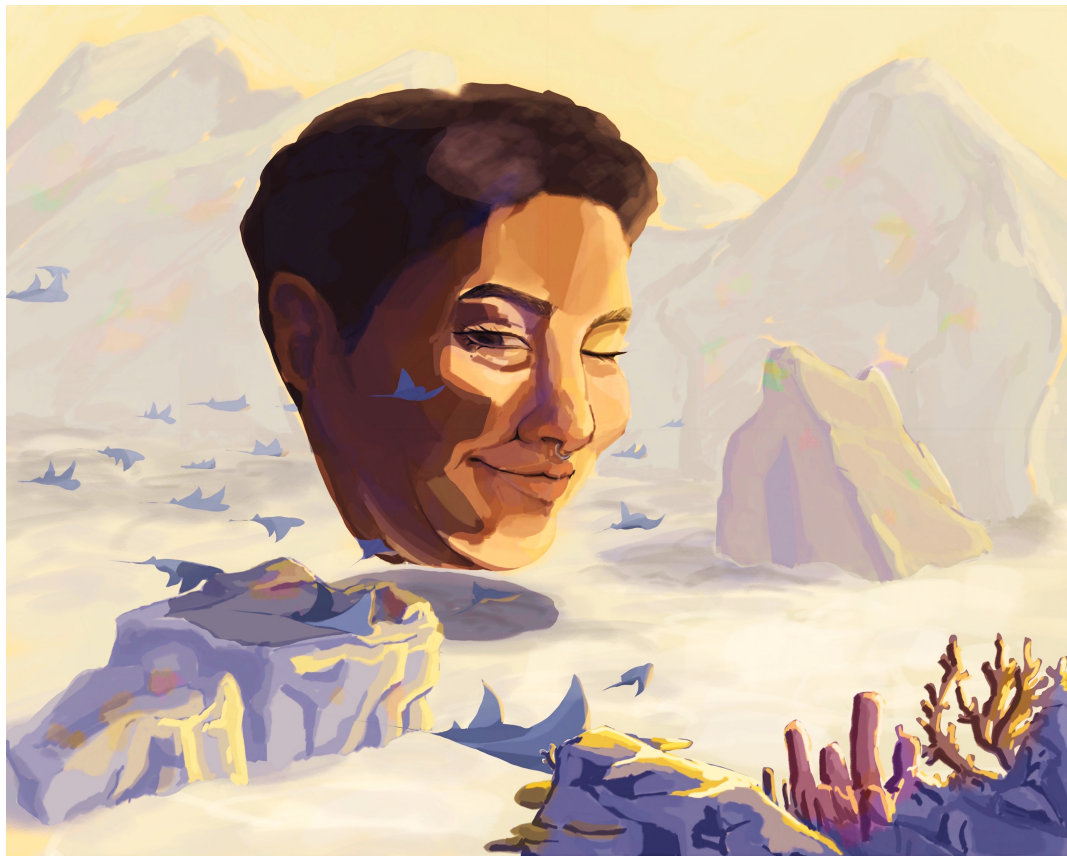
the maple, the pebble, the well all dream
themselves into parallel storylines, and
you in it. hooked fish. what happens if

you blink? wading ankle, knee, breast-
bone deep in these tapestries, I forget
what. did I come here to fix? am I a?

it is some time o'clock and it looks like
the countryside. having forgotten my
mission, I sit at the station.

Immigrating Thoughts

By Sofia Reyes



We Feel Differently

by Isabelle Ryan

During the assessment (my fourth in a year), they ask about support systems. *Family? Friends?* I struggle and stutter and that is enough. Months later, the sessions start, and this time I'm allowed to talk. No one makes me float bad thoughts downstream or regulate my breathing. I can cry for fifty minutes straight, or preach about Old Hollywood. I even sometimes talk about my family, but only if I want to. I'm not allowed to say that no one cares about me. I don't know how to explain that maybe someone does, but we feel differently about each other.

*

I imagine I would cry if she touched me. In my worst daydreams, I sit across from her as wet heat gathers in my skull and promise in a small choked voice not to embarrass her, or make a scene over coffee and cake. Something catches in her throat—a soft sound, a somehow kind dismissal of my fear—and she rests cool fingertips on the back of my hand. Later, I will trace the path her thumb swept gently on my cracked and angry skin. Now, she squeezes my fingers, takes back her hand and never touches me again.

*

Five fifty-minute phone calls later I am back to searching. Another assessment, another gentle (tearful) insistence that yes, talking will help more than exercises I don't understand. Then she asks about support systems. *Family? Friends?* For the first time, my mouth listens to my brain. I say her name. I say I haven't heard from her in a few days. I am discharged after three of the six planned sessions. *Not the right kind of support.* I scratch myself and calculate. How much can I put aside each month for another person who might tell me I need something different?

*

When I dream, I live with false memories for days. I tie myself in knots that freshly-cut nails can't unpick: false, yes, imagined and impossible; but horrible enough that maybe something happened long, long ago and this is how I remember. I do remember once-awake-petrified, mouth filled with spit-damp pillowcase, something I hid from myself resurfacing, wracking. But that I don't dream about. I see my friend, messaging, distraught: a tragedy in the family. I wake up trembling, stupid, convinced I'm wrong yet *I know how this sounds*, I type, *but I had a dream—is everything okay?*

*

I worry she knows something about me. There's nothing to know, but I worry anyway. When blue bubbles broadcast replies to the assorted inboxes I've checked fifty times in as many minutes, I think *Yes*, think *At last*, and open them with a mixture of sick apprehension and terrible peace. *At last* is right. At last, she's learned the truth, a truth I would tell her if only I knew what it was. At last, she can give up without guilt. I say, *Sorry I'm so sad and needy*. She says, *I hope I can make you a little happier*.

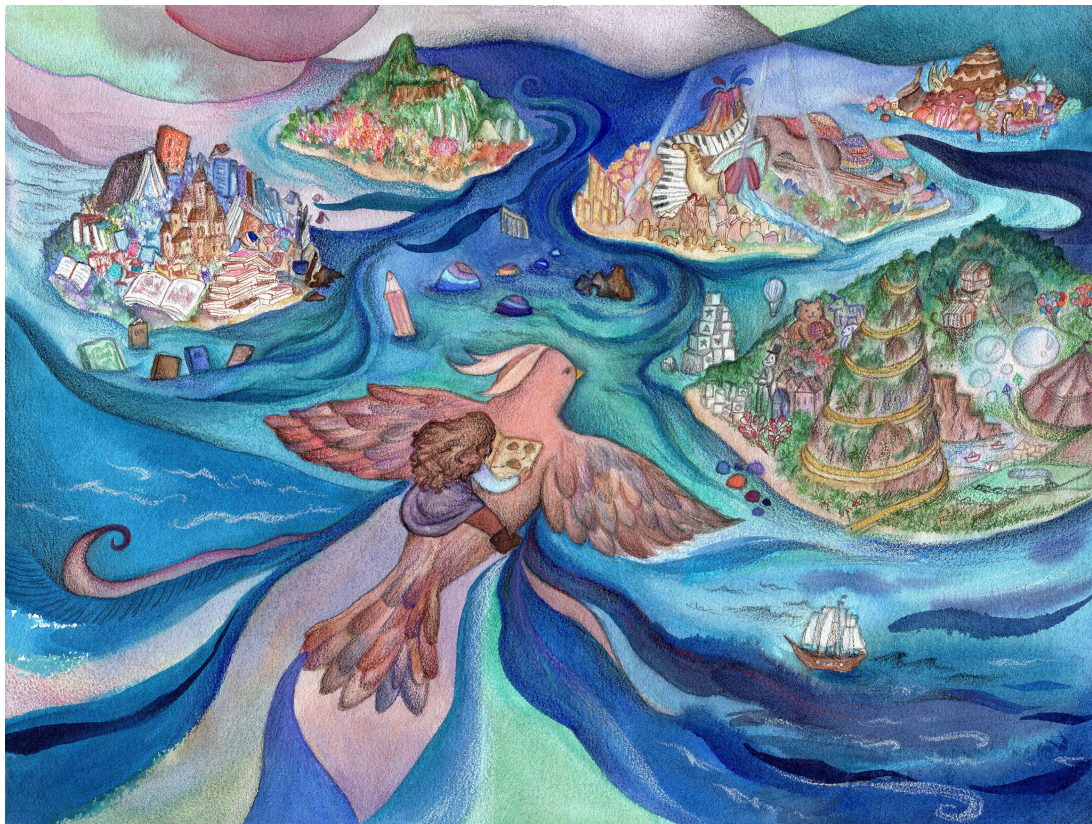
dream come true

by Eren

i dreamt she kissed me on a hillside
on green grass surrounded by trees
i still remember the scent of her hair
i woke up with a thrill in my chest
of excitement and fear
every day i saw her, it was harder to resist
making the dream come true
scared of being a sinner, i wrote in my journal
“i can’t get these images out of my head”
(a recurring daydream)
i prayed, “take these desires away”
every day i saw her, i caught the scent of her hair
and soon enough, i kissed her on a hillside
on concrete surrounded by chain link fences
it was better than i dreamed it would be
we became more than i could have imagined
and months later, when we are torn apart
(and years later, when someone asks me about my first kiss)
i grasp for the dream
and i still remember the scent of her hair

The Journey Begins

by Ligia Camolesi



anatomy of what it takes to dream

by Siena Ho Shun Yi

sleep

*is for the weak therefore i do not deserve kindness outside customary
acknowledgments in Ritalin sleep means restless / i acquire its accent
through dozing on fistfuls of powdery capsule extended release you
could be talking about Thanatos's little teasers and swirl it round
your tongue the same*

fantasy

*is reality is something i can't differentiate i watch the girl next to me
hold red butterflies / my head is on the table she is butterflyless
staring back should i ask was i out long enough for the death of a
wish*

fragmented

*nature of its occurrence is unpredictable the only consistency is the
flow of what i say is always so viscous so condensed like sweating in
bed alone unknown*

subconsciously

*i am nowhere between the zone of active thinking and rapid eye
movement if so much of our mind is unexplored what happens if it
picks the wrong battle if it chokes me instead*

paralysis

*occurs after little slips little dozes i'm not supposed to take a
narcoleptic diagnosis is not my antidote it leaves the ghost even
hungrier i know too well how the ghost lives in people leaves in
disdain from their mouths and i can't do anything can't move*

tranquil

*heart beats tranquil blood bleeds panic in situations expected but not
prepared for example the gash in my knee from slipping down an
escalator / it didn't hurt half as much when i never knew that
moment another example / revision of the last class example when i
learnt that it is okay to*

dream

but better to live / for now

wake

is what i long for / a concept foreign to my ears

Punching Bag

by Theo T.

I woke up on Tuesday at 4am, arms goose-bumping in the “fuck you; it’s technically morning” chilly air while the rest of my body seized within the sweaty mass of sheets. I had a bad dream. Not one so terrible as to be deemed a nightmare, but it was, as I call such minor inconveniences, not fun.

In it, a transphobic, famous author had offered me a joint publishing deal. We had met inexplicably at a coffee shop, which alerted my sleeping self to the pseudo-reality of the situation: I don’t drink coffee. So, we happened to start chatting while knowing anger crackled in my now lucid haze like my dad’s Saturday morning bacon. Dad cooks it too long, until it’s dry and lets off a cloud of smoke, and I couldn’t believe this author thought I was enjoying our conversation because that smoke must have been swirling around my head.

Maybe I was fooling them, though. My friends will probably read this, and I don’t want to talk about myself so plainly because I don’t really want them to know: I don’t get outwardly angry. Not often. The one time they can recall, and share like a day of great renown, is when I was too hungry and too tired to be packed into a convention’s auditorium and forced to weave between the idiots who don’t know you *don’t stop in the middle of the aisle*. God!

But that’s about it. I get coolly angry, icily angry, the kind that freezes beneath you, waiting for that one wrong step onto the crack so I can let go and watch you sink. It’s not a healthy anger. I’m consciously working on it.

I wasn't conscious in the dream. My anger groaned beneath my feet while the two of us got a table and some breakfast burritos and I tried to make small talk and to remember exactly how many teeth an adult human has and if my knuckles would last that long. They dared to make transphobic comments, although not about me. I haven't transitioned, and hadn't brought it up (my rage reflected off of them, catching brightly in the corners of my eyes because maybe I should present differently. Maybe I should stop this whole charade.)

I said nothing.

By the end of the meal, we had become quick friends. They opened their laptop and typed up a proposal. We would co-author their next book. I would get published, publicity, my name on the charts. I could *write* and not *worry*.

"I'll give you a minute to think about it," they said, smiling, *knowing*, that asshole, that I needed it. That there was no question what my answer had to be. They went to use the restroom and I stared at the document.

I can't sell myself out for this. Can't let the fame and acclaim and financial security for the rest of my life in a field that's notoriously difficult to make it in, to the point that it's a joke amongst those in the profession, tempt me.

And I hated them. I was still imagining all the slow, terrible ways they could die. That frigid anger was cracking along my spine and shooting painful shards out to my toes. I hated them with a ferocity that made my neck burn with permafrost and my heart pound like it was beating its way out from a glacial cavern. I smiled to their face, but I hated them for hating me and most of all, I hated them for making me hate someone.

I want to be kind.

But fuck them.

What does it matter in a dream?

I composed a condescending response (and I don't actually know what it was. My sleeping brain couldn't bear to tell me) on a napkin, *and*. I used the spare grease from my meal to write it. It was the ultimate professional disrespect; *that* would show *them*. I left the shop before I would have to explain my refusal of their very generous, disgusting, offer, then woke up to that bitter morning.

Hours later, I heard voices outside my room. With working from home, my parents are around a lot more often. The smell of overcooked bacon drifted under my door, so I got up and trudged out into the living room. At his desk, my dad was applying for his booster vaccination, and I'm endlessly grateful that my family listens to science and that they don't intentionally hate the queer community. My mom knows I'm bisexual, and I'm going to tell my dad and my brother soon. But as I passed by my dad's desk, he muttered, "assigned sex at birth? Come on people, just say gender; it's not complicated."

Maybe I should've come out right then: *Surprise, you have two sons. Sometimes.*

I said nothing.

Instead, I froze the kitchen over as I made eggs and sat down to my second breakfast. I ate and hated that I needed to say something and hated that I had said nothing.

I want to love my dad.

I want to love myself.

I do.

The teeth dream

by Angel Cézanne

I know my eyes are open—
I hear every blink, like
the shutter of an obsolescent twin-lens camera—
I can look down to see
the lush green at my feet
wiggle my toes buried by clovers and aphids
my eyes follow the ground
see it give way to a water's edge
to an earth-filled dam that stands
pale and haunting in a still pool
but the air is thick with nothingness
there's no breeze to whistle
through leaves or to carry a bird's tune
my mouth opens to scream
for help or just to stop the silence
but instead, there are broken bits of teeth
spitting forth silently—
I follow them to the ground, crawling
to pick up the pieces of coffee-stained bone
that fell or forced their way out of me—
I carry them for miles then
with no trail to lead me
until day turns to night
and I find myself back at the dam
with empty hands—
I lie down among the aphids
and admit defeat—

chimera

by Kayla



Warehouse

by Joe Haward

Deep within a vast forest, I am running. The trees around me look black, like coal, the faintest of light from the moon illuminating fortunate branches. My breath is labored through fear, an uncontrollable desire to escape, yet I'm unable to recall what, or who, it is I am running from. The forest clears, and a large warehouse emerges from the darkness, its doors open as though it has always been waiting for me. The metal walls and roof shine with an obsidian luminosity, forcing its shape and presence out of the shadows. I stop running and slowly make my way into the warehouse, the world quiet around me, my footsteps all that echoes. The floor is made of concrete, scattered with the occasional piece of straw. The warehouse is huge, and I cannot see the far wall from where I stand. Looking up, I see beams running across the roof, high and out of reach, way beyond my ability to climb. There is a single window, on my left, to the side of one of the beams. I can see the moon through it, a silver glow reaching into this dark space. This slither of luminance brings a figure to light, standing upon one of the beams. I cannot tell who or what it is. Their face is hidden behind shadows, whilst they wear a long, dark, cloak. I gaze at them, terrified and frozen, knowing that I need to run, but unable to move my body at all. The figure jumps from the beam and descends upon me, my world obliterated into a darkness that jolts me awake.

Cathedral

by Alex Innocent

I soar
scaling the heights of the boundary wall
clawing my way up the plains
of its frigid walls
gargoyles for footholds

I plaster
my palms over the sculpted skulls
of the saints as I ascend
gripping its ancient spire between my thighs
and force my way
through the lead montage of its windows

I ride
the fanned struts
of its nave's ceiling
Saint Denis, my severed head
under one arm

I twizzle
down its columns
the firefighter on the pole

I combust
 with fervor
 lapping the cloistered refectory
beating the bleep test of the bells
across the nave

I leapfrog
 the aisle's sunken graves
slithering in and out of the organ's huge pipes

I stuff
 my underwear
with the bounty of the collection plate
 - Bible on my back -
tongue in flames

I plunge
 myself into the font
 and am eternally lost
into the waste trap beyond the plug hole

I Can See My House from Here

by Jessica Daly

I spent my adolescence and adult life up to this point completely unaware of my father's whereabouts, and him unaware of mine. If he knew where I was, coastal and heartbroken, a protein container surrounded by party drugs and Botox, perhaps he would've written me off a final time.

When he took his life in June, I now, quite officially, did not know where he was. But in this dream, I knew. I think he was waiting for me.

I roamed tall evergreen trees in a forest with no landmarks, no red push pin on a digital map. It was dark and light all at once, sunlight cutting into branches and laying down to die upon beds of creamy grass, streaked with dew, compounded into rolling hills that gave way to a house with only one door.

I entered, and he was there, in front of me. There was a solemn chair in the center of the room, walls bleached to colorless gulfs of white paint. He was sitting on it, expectant, with an expression drawn to severity by guilt and shame.

I took no time to consider the way I'd run towards the knowledge of this house, how I'd known its location, how I'd known my father had erected this devastatingly neutral space for us to talk. But he wasn't talking. He was just staring.

What was it I had felt on the way—panic? Desperation? Urgency—anxiety a whisper in my blood. I wondered if he felt the years between us then, time lost and forever compressed into the scope of all those seconds he spent withholding himself. I wondered

if he saw himself when he looked at my face.

Naturally, I screamed. It felt right. I'd spent the last few weeks telling anyone that would listen that all I wanted to do was make my grief known to him, have it be tangible and real and there, something for him to hold, knowledge for him to digest in the suicide mission of his pre-frontal cortex.

He had no reaction when I screamed, wondering how he could do this to me, wondering how he could leave, demanding answers that could not and would not mend the static abyss that had opened up the fleshy layers of my heart and left it cold and blue. If anything, by the end of it, he looked angry. His silence was not comprised of apology—I knew then and I know now, it was self-pity. Even still, even then, even now, even as I type this out with the tenacity of an insane person recounting her dead father visiting her in her dreams, my words were undigested. I finished our conversation by telling him to go to hell. I hope that isn't where he is.

Upon every attempt at slumber and every exhausted flutter of eyelashes exfoliated by salty tears, I try to find the house in the broken lineations of my mind.

This Vessel Called My Body

after “Waking in Winter” by Sylvia Plath

by Terry Ann Wright

My darling, all I ever wanted from you was all
that was possible. I couldn't want more. Then one night
you bowed your head and told my cheekbone *I*
love you. For the past few months, I have
shouted at you in my head, *say it, say it*. I dreamed
of this moment for years, for years. Of
course in the morning light I only see destruction,
writing out on hotel stationery all the small annihilations
of the big moments that you practice. In an
instant I finally name my terrible sadness, drop the assembly-line
rituals of my daily life I use to numb it. I dreamed of
this moment and now it has come and gone. A deep cut
in my heart slowly fills and spills over. All these sore throats—
can't you see it's the words we say and don't say? And
in the car you stare off into the distance, you hesitate, you
carefully gather your thoughts before speaking, and
my heart pauses. My love, what will become of this *you* and this *I*?

Mr. Thunder Crying Over the City

by Ligia Camolesi



recurring

by Ed Dams

strange rhythms in memory. sleep like a slow rolling,
cradled between palms. he persists: charlie brown
best version of himself, appearing on the gate, legs splayed.
one over land as he practices his balance.

he isn't wearing sea shoes. he would hate for his mother
to peel off that crusting shirt afterwards. no one else
will tenderly undo the buttons. he has the authority
of the faster friend, too stubborn to lose his breath,

though his legs shake with effort. they're shaking now.
what plans he has — all fiction, just hollow space
your brain fills. he is planting trees for his children,
leaving messages in library books, dedicating himself to us

for the inevitable. long way down, but pretty from here.
blue-bellied world. he is fabricating due dates for future returns.
he is playing the piano piece again, better without words.
how many times will he shake your hand? he's happy.

it's not for sightseeing. the steady work, understanding
the stress, year by year. other people cope with things wholly,
and you have this. he swings his other leg over, perfect form.
the face incoherent. even now it swims.

there is a dream

by Tahlia Mckinnon

and in it, i am different

i am more

than ice and holes and half-memories

my name climbs your walls

like lavenders, not line-breaks

and the ground is still warm

but

it's not where you find me

steel ribbons

by Jess Roses



Heathrow

by Steph Amir

It's 10am. The plane is leaving at 11. The gate is past the airport juice bar.

It's 4pm. The plane left at 11. You are at the juice bar on a beach in Jamaica.

It's 11am. You are on the plane, with your pineapple-mango mocktail and your sleeping bag. It's going to be a long flight. You wish you hadn't left your books on your hotel bed.

You are at the hotel, collecting your books, but now you might miss your flight because there are no taxis to take you back to the airport.

Why are you in a taxi in London when everyone knows the traffic is terrible? You should have caught the train. Now you're going to miss your flight.

They don't even call it the train in London, they call it the...subway? No, wait. That's New York.

Underground. You are under the ground, in the sewers of London. The tunnels are dark and there is murky water sloshing at your feet. Now you will definitely miss your flight. At least you have your books with you. Wait, where are the books?

Maybe you left them in New York, on the subway.

Why are you in a sewer? You need to get to the airport. The plane is leaving at 11. What time is it now?

You check your phone. It's 72 o'clock. Stupid phone. Stupid Apple and their stupid planned obsolescence and stupid non-compatible operating systems. Now you're going to miss your flight because there are no taxis in the sewer.

You keep walking through the sewer. There's the juice bar and a clock.

It is 10am.

A Dream of the Future

by Bex Machina

When I say I am my own muse I mean this:
that I am the image of beauty that was kept from me

That I look on my own face
and see things never promised

That the good thing that I am is mine

and in the way I am so deeply in love with myself
and my transgressive body
I am also in love with the world

Because a part of me lives in every person who tries
to choose the ways of love
to care in a world that seeks to make us careless
to make themselves gentle and soft
in the way the bite of the wolf is soft as she defends her
pack alongside her siblings

Because the darkness does not just die
when we set the structures that harm us ablaze
but we can keep it out by building something new
with the work of our hands
we keep alight the flame

We carry each other
and when it is your time we will carry you

in your beautiful transgressive body
and the community between us will be the beauty that
was denied us.

Dream Bedroom

by Ligia Camolesi



stargazing from my bedroom's window

by Clarice Lima

the walls keep me constricted but at least
there is room for stars
i have been told you can see a shooting star
after looking inert for fifteen minutes
i have only seen one in nineteen years
after that i have never been lucky again
i guess they just don't fall around here
peek the remains of light under the weight of eyelids
try to trade one of its white glimmering globes for an eyeball
roll it on my tongue feel the taste once
launch it to the great space
wave a tail of falling veins and lacteal fluids
the pupil inquires its place on the universe
the torn skin can tell it doesn't belong
the eye reverses its motion and descends
not a blasting rocket but a shooting star at last
i guess there is more than this
i guess it is just unattainable
close the apertures of the chamber cell
lock every vestige of otherworldly brightness
feel the revolving forces of gravity tumbling on my belly
one time and never again

The Good News

by Stephanie Nieves

I'm in a vivid dream.

Trapped in a hazy vignette, I find myself in a room of wooden walls, see a brown leather couch leaning lazily on one side. There are weapons behind glass cases on each wall. Lit by daylight bulbs and half-hidden in their own shadows, I notice a reflection of myself in front of these axes, butcher knives, guns and things. See them twinkling, half-happily just for me.

In order to have fun in this room, you must die every night — and you can't be afraid of the pain.

I don't know how I know this, but I do.

And I'm not alone.

There are lots of people in here, but I can't find any of them. They only come to me in thoughts: A man with short, curly hair that I can't see. A couple or two as close as they are far away. I don't want any part in this, I know, so I leave.

Run into a hallway, thankful for the logic, then into a living room, an ironic contrast to the last. See a couch left, window up, TV middle — my little sister.

My little sister?

Where's Sajdah?

"It's time to make amends," I say. But I don't know who I'm talking to when I say this. I'm just scared she's out there fighting, scared she's probably somewhere in here, and it's all blurry in between.

Until I'm in the car, a big car, like a van. And "Praying" by Kesha comes on. I don't know any of the words, but still they come to me, her voice singing tearfully in my ears. Is this what I wanted for Sajdah—salvation? Or is this what I needed for me? I don't know.

But now I'm on what looks like the haunted house ride at Coney Island, and there's someone on the phone telling me not to look right.

Sounds like Jigsaw from those *Saw* movies— I catch a glimpse.

Then I look left.

And the driver, a man with short, curly hair rests his head on the wheel. Says something like, "When you're not looking..."

"When I'm not looking, what?"

"And where are we going?"

"Is this a tunnel or a wall?"

I can't even tell until I'm crashing through it,

and now it's all in slow motion.

I watch the car smash in front of me. Feel the airbag press against my face, the flames swallow me whole. I melt as the fire colors in and out of me, yellow and orange and yellow again, dancing feverishly across my skin. Then I look down at my beige, long-sleeved shirt.

Okay?

The phone is on my right side, and I'm climbing out. Through the open side door, I feel the flames coming up to my neck. My back's burning. Walking, running, now I'm running.

I throw myself onto the ground and scream for help. But when I hit the ground, I jolt back up. Running, running, I keep running toward the light.

And it feels *good*.

Cool and healing on my skin.

Running past a lake and a pastel sunset. Past a lake in a purple dress and my hair neatly done.

I'm running to tell a person that I love them.

And I don't know how I know this, but I do.

Then I'm walking with a girl. And I see a friend from college: Aloysius. He's waiting for me in Times Square. What's Aloy doing here?

I think. What's *Aloe* doing here? Oh! I guess it's time to heal—
okay.

* * *

I lay in bed that evening, rubbing my eyes until I could bring myself to open them, and I stared at my popcorn ceiling.

"I need to tell a person that I love them," I remember, before scribbling the rest of the details in a notebook on my nightstand.

Before I can stop myself, I yell my sister's name.

I need to tell a person that I love them. Then she walks in through my door which she usually needs to knock before entering, and when she has knocked, will speak lowly from a crack. Ask to borrow clothes she rarely gives back or shoes I know I'll never see again, but I give them to her anyway.

Tonight, she walks right in and I let her. Walks right in and I tell her.

Tell her that **I love her.**

The words trail out of my mouth, coming as a surprise to both of us — not because I meant it, but because I said it at all — and her face *beams*. "I just had to tell you that," I continue, breaking what's left of the ice. She repeats me and responds with a hug, and we bask in the moment. And at the base of our new testament, we just laugh.

dream girl

by Ashley Varela

let me explain:

it is the everything of her
the whole universe of her

her fury yes & her joy
& her hands, her hands!
& how i would risk hell for her

(yes, maybe it is the hell of her —

something you will never need to gamble
something you will never get to relish

— her flames & her saving grace)

The voyeur

by Stephanie Powell

In the gallery I launch into a Renoir.
Le Moulin de la Galette gains an extra figure.

Middle distance, I am the man wearing
a stove pipe. I can feel the knuckles

of my spine pushing through my evening jacket.
I am looking over the crowd at a woman in an

opal-coloured dress. The wind
is her breath across the room.

A child brushes my elbow and my feet slam
back on the polished floorboards of the

Musee d'Orsay. There are cross words
in several different languages.

In the kitchen of a house party, I am hungry for anonymity–
I become a wine glass, let others drink from me.
Streaks of wine run from my belly to lip,
stain my see-through body. At risk of shattering–
I am left on a bookshelf, found in the morning lying
on my side by the feet of the couch. The hangover lasts three days.

I desire to become so many things.

Until I swap my eyes for stones.

Blinded, I move like the fish–

folding into the

in the familiar comfort

of its school.

Brain Trails

by Teodor Rakhilkin, @falafel_draws_pickles



put the tissues away

by Vee Parsons

I don't feel like you like me anymore.

we always come to this point where you start pushing me away again, but you give so many mixed signals and mixed emotions that I never know if it's self-sabotage or if you really hate me. but I'm *hurt*, and I'm *tired*, and I'm *tired of getting hurt*. I keep having these dreams where the palm reader looks at my hands and sobs. the tarot reader sighs and puts the deck away. the tea reader takes the kettle off the stove and pours it down the drain. *there's no use, darling. you're already a lost cause. why bother?* they say. *dream of better things, darling. put the tissues away and dream of better dreams.* if only it were that simple. maybe, in my next dream, I'll be writing love letters to my heart. *I'm sorry I've put you through all this. I am, I'm sorry, for all the pain I've made way for you to endure.* my heart will look at me and say *sorry?* *you're sorry? why would you say that when you know we'll just do it again?* but my heart doesn't realize it's really her in charge, leading me back to you. it's *her*, causing all these dreams I've had, good and bad. my heart can't make up my mind but my mind already knows where she's at - stuck on loving you. maybe, one day, I'll wake up, and realize all this has been just a dream.

there is a boy under my bed

by Tahlia McKinnon

and he's trying to steal my body. this room has no windows; meaning there is no escape; meaning the walls are slick with sweat, but not my own. and the smell is so unclean. it's a scent i used to crave, when old boyfriends would bench-press or return to me from their basketball games. i'd try to wring them out between my thighs. like dishcloths. but right now, i can't help but heave.

the wallpaper is purple, like the blush of a bruise, and the boy says my body *never belonged to me anyway* and maybe he's right. because i can't help but notice how those cornices curl into the ceiling like violent fingertips. the blue hue of blood curdled into the carpet. my shadowed skin pressed clean-through the teeth of the bedframe.

and that's when i wake up. and that's when i remember.

my body never belonged to me anyway.

sleepscape

by Kay Kro

sleepscape

pushed my face up through
water, resurfacing
in that dream, I was lost
on a very long driveway
past the hills and the
glass-covered store

that sleepscape still comes,
serene and sad
finds me when I'm waking
is more feeling than story
takes my deep breath and
unmoors me

I remember the fog in the trees
in that place I never lived
only visited, astrally
felt, ancestrally
ate, metaphorically, because
the obscure logging remains

you look so cool.

by Andy VanDoren

I pulled into an empty space
in an empty street
life trickling down the seams,
a dream dying in place.

how many times

have my heels written

a story on the asphalt

is my teenage shadow now

a ghost on the railroad tracks

on slow summer days?

the town is an electric grin in the dark

gilded in white

but everybody's dead

or dying

the fountain of youth runs still before my eyes-

you thank god for your mortgage, I thank

Hozier for waving that flag at the concert

and showing me a pathway home.

this town reeks of desperation
happily so, it's so much easier to
close your eyes and surrender your breath
than it is to grab your reflection by her
shoulders and face her towards a
world on fire that will scorch her lungs and
consume her spirit until she's just as
in love as she is
exhausted.

nobody wants to wake up from a perfect dream
they don't have ears for those who left
to walk on land
if we even existed at all.

another person filled my bones back then
when I walked those streets
like they were the only stage in the world
like I was worth the entry fee.

on dreams & you and i

by CJ

in my dreams
i'm allowed to reach for
the unattainable—
 you

they are my only reprieve
from the reality i must face
the reality in which—
my body is not mine
& my name is not mine
& my entire being is owned
by someone else

but life is different, here
in the liminal space between
consciousness and nothing

here
you are finally mine
i take hold of you
never wanting to let go

i feel my soul connect
back to my body
i feel my life rush through
short strands of hair
i trace my name in the clouds
and repeat it like the lord's prayer
i call it affirmations
you call it reality

& for a few moments
(or seconds or hours or minutes)
i am my purest being
shining, radiant, *alive*
tucked in this corner
of heaven

The Three Snake-Leaves

by Terry Ann Wright

Every family dreams of a boy and a girl
in that order, or at least, made to order.
There's a house to fill; no, not that one.
You overachieve, a girl and a boy and
a girl. Asked over and over, *do twins run*
in your family? you perfect your answer: they do now.

The young princess will only marry
if her intended agrees to one thing:
the rule of threes. No, no. She only asks that
he will be buried alive with her. The china cabinet
looms darkly against the wall and he imagines it
falling on him, the crashing, flattened into nothingness.

The rest of the time he dreams of leaves: leaves that heal,
leaves that bring him back from the dead, the leaving, the end.

With Serenity

by Dre Hill



We all live a life strung together by a series of moments connected by waking and sleeping dreams. Our waking dreams are the ones that push us to shoot for the stars, tap into our gifts, and unleash our potential. They are often an extension of actions we are taking, or a call to action towards the desires of our future. Our waking dreams are about movement, passion, and presence. Our sleeping dreams are what interest me. They project softness, peace, and vulnerability. The mind is open to receive and perceive any number of experiences without the constrictions of conscious thought. Our sleeping dreams are about listening, rest, and retrospective. What do we need to know or finally listen to? It is in our sleeping dreams that all is revealed. I wanted to portray the softness and vulnerability of sleeping dreams, especially within the context of black bodies. Bodies that deserve rest, that deserve peace. What do black bodies dream about when they are asleep? What do they learn?

oracle bones

by Kalila Camilon

i am silently inscribing to you, dear **oracle**, my divination. i slip into another slumber without an edge.

1. you are a specter, and i awake in a nameless lobby in a mansion where we sipped iced tea from ceramic sinks. there is an overgrowth of mangrove and bougainvillea on the walls— i can tell you the names of their leaves, their stems, and their petals. i looked for your roots, oracle, but you were gone. instead, i looked for your name in the maps of stars; somewhere in june i will find you at polaris. then i fell endlessly over the space's borders.
2. a dark, nameless aquarium. in this cold expanse, only a pale lamp illuminates my eyelids. how afraid i am to fall asleep in this—how it was once filled with strangers, how warm and blue it was in the currents like jellyfish bloom, how it was like to race through taft avenue to get mcdonalds with a lover in the middle of the night, and waking up to honking cars down the streets from an unmade bed in your condo—eroded into dust. and now, it is only me and the blinking neon telling me that i shouldn't be awake. there's a reason why we never write poems about angler fish.
3. a clairvoyance: something that is yet to be there. tonight, i am catching the bus hoping to see the shape of your shadow waiting for me at the bench near david's tea house.

4. i am trying to remember a taiwanese film—the one where three characters are enveloped with loneliness and longing to connect with one another, they lived in the same condo unit without a glimpse of each other's bare presence—utterly dwarfed by the fast-paced, bustling nightlife in the heart of taipei. we forget about it when we go to bed and kiss each other on a video call.
5. deluge in the shape of a fishbowl. i swear i was drowning and you couldn't extend your hand to save me. after that it was dark again. i heard a beep that told me you had already hung up on me.
6. i ride a jeepney to manila to look for the angler fish in my dreams so i can ask for its name again. instead, i find a dry bouquet of chrysanthemums lying where we once hugged each other to sleep, your face silently resting on a pillow. i feel soft and holy by your side.

liminal

by Jess Roses

it seems bad taste to write
today, with the author
curled up against herself
in the blue chair
spinning chaos behind the eyes.

is her dreamers web
insufficient for the story—does the
gossamer
hold
beneath the scrutiny? no.
the plot
is all wrong, not even the house
of leaves led so deeply
into the back rooms of the psyche.

living liminally leaves little room
for the solid stuff, this parsed
this pruned poetry, boxhedges
lining the driveway
to the mansion you expect to find,
the grand castle of my design
inside, dirty dishes line the windowsill
crumbs in my bed
and the clothes on the floor build
an ocean, kelp wraps the ankles
and coaxes a fall

into a dark room lit by screens
and better afterthoughts than words
could capture -
here, in the single crack of light
where the curtains
won't stay closed.

i find the words to keep the watch wound
and the music box turning,
but my magnum opus lives
only in dreams
while the author sleeps.

she told me i was her sweetest dream

by Leora Mosman



Josephine

by Nina Jardín

THE ROYAL ROAD

In Gestalt Therapy, dreams are referred to as “the royal road of integration,” where all aspects of the self mix and combine together, like cake batter in a bowl. Sometimes, we ask the client to tell us all about their dreams to bring those intense unconscious images and feelings to life—to the forefront of their consciousness—to understand and ultimately work through them. This is called *dream work*.

Dream work is a smaller part of Gestalt Therapy than other experiments, such as *feeling the actual* and *staying with the feeling*, which focus on practicing mindfulness and staying present. When we bring our awareness to the present, we notice things within ourselves almost instantly—things we’ve been ignoring, like back pain or anxiety—in that time of rest. Here, dreams are mere messages from the self to the self, and in dwelling in the attempt to decipher their “deeper” meanings, we risk misguiding the client down the dangerous path of dissociation. In fact, one of Freud’s closest colleagues, Alfred Adler, believed the healthiest clients rarely remembered their dreams.

There were little studies to substantially support the claim that dream work could trigger extreme symptoms, such as dissociation and derealization in clients with depression, PTSD, or anxiety, but the studies were there. They were there.

Since childhood, Josephine Julia Garcia suffered from sleep paralysis and was haunted by nightmares that only worsened with time. Her grandfather died when she was young, and her aunt died soon after him. She talked to her dead relatives at the dinner table and in the car, and soon, she lost interest in making friends altogether.

She had a family history of mental illness and addiction. She got help once the hallucinations started, like the bugs on her skin, to the point where she couldn't discern her dreams from her waking life. She found her passion in psychology when she met her own psychotherapist and became a clinical psychotherapist herself. Eventually, she stopped attending her sessions and spent her time fanatically studying Jung's dream theories. Like Josephine, Jung believed dreams revealed the unconscious, and that within the unconscious were psychic messages, spiritual revelations, and the ability to communicate with the dead. Josephine delved into these mysteries until she ultimately and unfortunately lost sight of the present moment as many like her do—like I've begun to, too.

THE CLIENT

"How've you been sleeping?"

"Eh."

"Eh?"

It was an understatement. The client shrugged and looked avoidantly around her room from corner to corner. Anywhere but the webcam.

"Talk to me," Josephine said and sipped her tea. The client was unaware that in the tea with honey was also a whopping splash of whiskey.

"I had The Dream again."

"Shit," Josephine said.

"But it's been different lately. Lately, I can get up and leave the room. Go smoke outside. *Drive* across the state."

"Wow. Driving?"

The client nodded, withholding her true level of excitement over it.

“It’s been three years since the accident.”

Silence. The client’s car accident was the one thing she never discussed. It was back when she was still with her ex. She drove their truck into a ditch in the dead of night while he was screaming at her, and he passed out with his head bloodied up against the dash, but he was still breathing. She escaped the wreck and moved back to her mother’s house, and never drove or heard from him again.

She redirected the conversation. “I’m just tired of seeing him in my dreams. No matter where I go, he’s there. I can go to the beach and theme parks and even concerts, but then it’ll thunder and rain, and he’ll be there. But I can always leave now. The movement of it all, mentally, I guess, is making me tired.”

“Well, then, *that’s* it. Don’t walk away.”

The client scoffed. The idea of *not* walking away was absurd to her. She looked younger than she was, hunched over in her bed with her big headset on. Her teeth looked like she just got her braces off the year before.

“Really! Walk up *to* him instead of walking away. Say, ‘Thank you for visiting my unconscious,’ and in that way, you face those fears, and can let them go.” Josephine wiggled her fingers in the air as if the words were tranquil like cool waters. Her eyes glazed over.

“How?”

“Lucid dreaming. Take control—” she balled her fist, “—and set intentions before bed. Take the time to visualize your desired dreams for the night. Think about the places, the people. The feelings. Envision it—*plan* it all.”

The client checked the time, put off by Josephine's intensity. "I just want the nightmares to be over."

"Lucid dreams and nightmares are very different. Nightmares are orchestrated by the darkest parts of our minds, and our minds take those possibilities of peace and rest from us. How do you wake up in the middle of the night?"

"Crying and sweating. Sometimes, screaming. Sometimes I can't breathe."

"Keep a dream journal. Every morning—or middle of the night, whatever—write all that you can remember from your dreams. It'll help you recognize your recurring nightmares as nightmares while you're in them and the familiarity you develop from the repetition will unlock a greater sense of autonomy. You'll be able to reset the scene. Fly even. Lucid dreaming can be helpful, and fun, in that way. And you'll no longer mistake your dreams for real life."

"I don't mistake them for real life. I can tell the difference from when I'm dreaming and when I'm awake."

"How do you know you're awake right now?"

THE NIGHTMARE

Imagine a man standing at the edge of your driveway. You see him from the kitchen window, but you're safe in your house—standing in your kitchen by the sink, holding a wet plate after dinner.

Some individuals' fight-or-flight response sends them running and hiding in the corners of their closets, while others may confront the man. Some, though, may freeze entirely, and may feel like they are in a purgatory between the two

responses.

You decide not to confront him. He's not on your property after all. But in the time you looked away, maybe to stuff your plate in the dishwasher, he's taken a step. His left foot on your lawn.

A single step. He has a few more of them to go and then there's, of course, the Breaking In he must do before the inevitable Getting To You, because rest assured, he's getting to you.

So, what do you do? Fight, flight, or freeze? You know he's coming toward you. He hasn't hurt you, not yet, but he's crossing a line. The intent is there. You can feel it. Your thighs feel like bags of sand and your feet stick to the tile.

In the client's latest nightmares, her unconscious kept this premise that it had for years, according to her dream journal (which was the most telling piece of evidence), and *her* instincts told her to freeze. To her, he was practically already in the house.

But lately, she was able to *leave* her house. She'd become aware in the dreams that she was dreaming earlier and earlier each night, more than she ever had before, and could make the conscious choice to go to the patio to smoke or run down the street.

But in her dreams—in her *wildest* dreams—she drove again, alone and with the windows down. She'd never done anything like that in her dreams before. But then, she'd see him again. The man from the edge of her driveway. The man who took a single step (and perhaps, this wouldn't have been a nightmare if she hadn't known what a single step always, in her experience, led to) and he was closer this time.

She spent the nights driving and running. She woke up tired, sore. Terrified.

One night, she faced the shadow. She saw him out the window and felt irritated and brave—and still half-asleep—and she did it. She faced him. He was faceless in the dark, but she knew who it was. She could feel it.

It felt close to dawn. It wasn't. She walked outside in the middle of the night in her purple pajamas, barefoot in the wet grass. She couldn't see him clearly in the dark, but she still managed to stare into his black eyes as they bored into hers. He was still. She was cold in the midnight mist and crossed her arms. It started to drizzle.

"Thank you for visiting my unconscious," she said. The raindrops were cold. She shivered. This dream was so vivid, but she felt calm. She'd faced him, and now all she had to do was wait for him to disappear.

The night sky lit up with lightning, and her eyes adjusted. She could see suddenly that he was more than just a shadow, that he was *real*, and it was then, at 11:54 p.m. on October 29th of 2021, that the client realized she wasn't dreaming.

Footage from the client's security cameras installed on the face of her home were able to pick up everything. Clearly. Her mother was the first to find her, right before her morning run. She watched the footage from her cellphone. The clip was used as evidence and was played on the local news. Everyone saw it, even me, and when I heard the girl in the pouring rain in cotton pajamas say, "Thank you for visiting my unconscious," I knew she was a client of Josephine's.

* * *

Knock-knock-knock.

"Josephine?"

“Go away.”

“I heard what happened. With your client. Let me in, Josephine.”

“No.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I said go away, Ben.”

Benny. What happened to Benny?

“Josephine—”

“Fuck off, Ben.” It was a warning.

“Josephine, please—”

“FUCK OFF.”

FAMILY HISTORY

Josephine wasn’t like herself when she drank, but then, she thought, maybe she was. Maybe that’s exactly who she was and who she was meant to be. Her family had a history of mental illness and addiction. She couldn’t be saved in the long run—she wouldn’t have it. The signs didn’t show her that.

She’d had *The Dream* after her grandfather died and her aunt was stationed in Germany. Josephine was lonely and scared as each night, her sleep paralysis worsened. She used to wake up with pain in her legs and would wait what felt like hours for her body to relax, and still, the rest of the day was spent recovering. Sometimes, her knee still gave out at the grocery store.

One day in December, she was playing in the nursery of her dollhouse, and she put the ceramic Baby Jesus she stole from her grandfather’s

nativity set under the Christmas tree in the plastic crib. He never let her touch his nativity set. She said the thought of him suddenly came to her mind and heart then—maybe it was the guilt—and she could feel him, almost as if he were sitting behind her on the edge of her bed, watching her play. She turned around and did not see him.

That night, she dreamt her grandfather played alongside her, holding the doll she imagined as herself, brushing her long brown hair. He pointed to the doll on the kitchen floor, the one in the Army officer's uniform. Josephine's aunt. He grabbed Josephine's hand to touch the doll's face, and Josephine saw her first vision in this dream within a dream. Her aunt, her godmother she loved so much, was dead on the kitchen floor, soaked in a puddle of blood and red wine. Then, the vision of her aunt's death changed to her own. She felt herself dying the same way, alone in the cold dark, but in the woods.

Josephine turned to her grandfather standing in the middle of her room in a black suit while her aunts and mother adjusted his tie and cuffs. He held a flask in his hand.

"The pain in your legs is my gift to you. Everything else you can help." He held out the flask and her ghostly mother grabbed it from him like a server and disappeared out of the room. She always wanted him to quit.

"Your aunt. Yourself. Take care of yourselves." Then, Josephine woke up, and her grandfather stood in front of her TV with his hands on his hips, in a brown suit now, the one he was buried in. She was used to seeing him in the middle of the night. She drifted back to sleep.

Your aunt. Yourself. Take care of yourselves, she heard him say again, but louder and clearer than she dreamt, and the words rang inside her mind like slamming cymbals. Her eyes flew open and stayed open until morning.

She had a bad feeling.

When her aunt returned from Germany, she was different. She laughed less and she did not take Josephine out as much as she used to. She never told Josephine what happened to her in Germany, but she planned their days out around fancy brunches instead of fancy dinners and the matinee instead of midnight premiers. She never felt present, not all the way. Her aunt existed somewhere deep in her mind. Josephine would hear her murmuring to herself while they walked hand in hand down the sidewalk. She constantly looked over her shoulder and jumped at sounds no one else could hear. She saw bugs flying around her face.

She did still go out at night alone sometimes—very rarely, but she did—and one night, she was mugged on the walk home and she blacked out, and she didn't return to the present until she was already back home. Josephine came running out of her room to the sounds of her aunt's shrieks, and she thought this was it, that night was The Night. She saw her aunt trembling in the kitchen, mortified at herself with a cup of tea and whiskey on the counter and blood on her body. The night was coming back to her, the mugging, the pack of men, and she felt she killed at least one of them that night. She muttered to Josephine that flashes of what she couldn't describe were coming back to her, more and more every day. She was talking though, for the first time in a long time, so Josephine thought she was getting better.

Her aunt drank herself to death two weeks later, and Josephine was the one to find her dead on the kitchen floor.

Normal guilt is healthy. *Neurotic guilt* can mean experiencing exaggerated feelings of guilt long after the person in context has forgiven you to punish the self. It can also mean feeling as if you feel no guilt at all. This was not the case for Josephine. Josephine felt as if she'd broken her promise to her aunt and to her grandfather's ghost, and her guilt had soaked and spread inside her like black mold under wet carpets. By her late twenties, she feared her guilt was bottomless, and as incurable as it was insufferable. Her drinking and

nightmares worsened.

As an adult, she dreamt she saw her aunt outside her bedroom window, standing at the edge of the woods behind her house, and when she looked closer, she saw that her aunt was just an older version of herself. She'd wake up in her dream within a dream on the couch to the *cuckoos* of the cuckoo clock her aunt brought home from Germany. It announced the hour louder than the thunder and visibly vibrated the air like gongs, and the *cuckoos* drove her *crazy*, until the gentler sounds of the real *cuckoos* woke her up from her drunk naps on the couch.

On October 30th, she dreamt of her client instead of the usual reflections of herself. She was being choked by a tall, dark figure. *Death himself*, Josephine shook her head like she'd seen this trick before. But why her client? Why—

Josephine woke up gasping and her shoulders jumped to her ears when the cuckoo clock announced the morning hour. She rubbed the sleep and sweat off her face and felt a vibration in the couch cushion. Immediately, a sinking, sickly green feeling washed over her body like slime. She had a bad feeling. She had the dream. She got the sign.

THE CALL

“Hello?”

“Josephine? Hi, I’m sure you have a lot of clients, but you meet with my daughter every two weeks, and the last time you met with her was about a week and a half ago, and I just wanted to—sorry, I still haven’t introduced myself—this is—”

“Jenna’s mother?”

“Yes. Yes, Jenna’s—” her voice broke, then cemented. “Jenna’s mother. Jenna died last night, Josephine. She—she was killed at the edge of her driveway.”

Josephine saw it all in her head and did not want to see the footage, did not want to hear about her client’s dream journal, or what her mother could vaguely remember about their biweekly sessions. She *saw* and knew what happened deep in the darkest pits of her stomach and mind. Her client had an abusive ex, Josephine knew, and she’d known he’d left her client alone for some years, but he must have turned up again out of the blue, in the middle of the night. Her client must have thought she was dreaming, and so faced him in the dark and in the rain.

And he killed her. Right in front of her house with his bare hands. Josephine felt nauseous. She drank two bottles of red wine after she hung up the phone and opened a third by lunchtime.

* * *

Knock-knock-knock.

I used to live there with her, you know. In that house. It was her aunt’s house. She inherited it. She lived there in the summers and let all the memories come flooding back like a rushing waterfall. The old, wooden floors. The soft white and yellow walls. The cuckoo clock. She left it there, all this time, through all the renters and all the winters. *I can’t take him away from here. He lives here. This is his home*, she used to tell me when I’d try to convince her to bring the clock home with us. It was the one thing she kept there in that house, and it felt like a part of herself she was keeping away, or keeping safe. I wanted her to know and feel that she was safe with me.

“Josephine?”

“Go away.”

We met in grad school. She was smart and beautiful. She never wasn't. She studied hard and she loved me so much, I know she did. We made plans.

“I heard what happened. With your client. Let me in, Josephine.”

“No.”

“It wasn't your fault.”

She never knew what to do. She distanced herself from everybody when she was forced to resign from the university six months ago. A student jumped from her office window and cracked his skull on the campus sidewalk. They found whiskey and rum in her office and found vodka in her car. I didn't realize she'd been drinking at work. I knew she was stressed, and suspected she was drinking more, but not at work. Not in her tea. She couldn't help herself, she thought, the way she couldn't help her godmother.

We all knew it wasn't her fault, that it must have been some accident, or the boy had climbed up too quickly for her to act. It shouldn't have happened. I couldn't and still can't imagine what that must have been like for her to see. She started talking to herself. She said she kept feeling Death around her. She'd cry in the middle of the night, saying to me that she was seeing ghosts and bugs. She said Death was coming closer, that she could feel it.

She said she needed to stay home and that she wanted to focus on working with her clients remotely. She lived on the couch. One morning, she told me in her robe, always slipping off her shoulder, that she needed time to get away. She couldn't even look at me anymore.

“I said go away, Ben.”

Where do you want to go?

I'm going to my aunt's house. I'm going to stay there for a while.

"Josephine—"

"Fuck off, Ben."

Okay. I'll pack our things and—

No—I'm going to stay there for a while. I need to be alone.

You don't want to be together?

I need to be alone.

"Josephine, please—"

"FUCK OFF."

I waited at the door for about a minute, choosing against using the spare key under the little jade Buddha by the front door to get in. Josephine opened the door just a crack. Her eyes were tired and drowsy, but still crazed. She was drunk. Into the view of her living room, shards of broken wine bottles sparkled on her wood floors like lake water. Some bottles she stacked by the TV like a house of Jumbo Playing Cards, and her ashtrays were spilled all over the floor. From her trail, it looked like she'd been sleepwalking. I hadn't even known she was a sleepwalker.

She looked over her shoulder for just a second at the disorder, embarrassed. Then she stepped outside, shut the door behind her, and closed the space between us.

"I'm fine. You need to go. You need to leave." She was like the Beast locked away in his castle.

"Have you been sleepwalking?"

“What? No, I don’t sleepwalk.” *Do I? Have I been? Why would he say that?*

The cuckoo clock on the other side of the door made Josephine jump. She was more on edge than usual.

“Josephine, let me help you clean up.”

Oh. The Mess. “Benny, go.” *I hardly remember making it. How much did I drink last night?* “Thank you, but go. I’m just tired,” she said, and then she kissed me, for the first time in a long time, and her mouth tasted like cheap wine and cigarettes. She shut the door then. I don’t know what she thought I was interrupting.

I should’ve stayed.

THE STUDENT

Knock-knock-knock.

“Professor Garcia? Can I come in?”

She looked up from her mug of rum.

“Yeah,” she called.

“I think—I think I’m dreaming.” Her student sat down in the old leather chair like he was making a confession in his principal’s office. “I think I’m in a dream.”

“Why?” Josephine asked, and it was her first mistake. She felt it immediately. She thought every day afterward that she should have just said, “No, friend, you’re awake. Go home. Rest.” But she didn’t.

Because she was wildly interested.

“I remember waking up this morning, but I...I don’t feel *awake*. I feel like I’m in—”

“A dream?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps, a dream within a dream,” Josephine laughed. “You know, Edgar Allan Poe?” It was one of Josephine’s favorite poems.

The student did not know the poem. “I think I *could* be—in a dream within a dream, like you said. I—I’m scared. I—”

His eyes flickered from side to side as if he was seeing the past day and night replay in his mind’s eye. He was in deep and needed to be pulled out, but Josephine let him drown.

“Then try to wake up. If this is a dream, try to wake up.”

* * *

Dream work is a very loose experiment. The client can retell the dream or reenact it. The client can ask the psychotherapist to roleplay as the other characters in their dream, and they can even move furniture around to better match the dream’s setting. The client can also talk to the psychotherapist as if they were still dreaming in that present moment, to enliven those feelings and keep them vivid. It’s a very free, unpredictable experiment, and it’s why I refrain from practicing it with my clients.

Josephine’s client tried to wake up by committing suicide, and he jumped out the window of her office and died on the campus lawn.

THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST

October 31st

I woke up today around 4:00 p.m. and I dreamt about Ben again, I guess some time this morning. He came up to my door talking about my client being on the news, and I shut the door in his face. I don't want to start fighting, we always do in my dreams. I'm tired of crying.

I can't believe what's happened. Death is all around me. The cuckoo clock, I think, is calling me.

In the dream, Ben asked if I'd been sleepwalking because the house was a mess. The house *is* a mess. The clock wouldn't shut up. *Won't* shut up.

Shut up. "SHUT UP!" I hardly recognize my voice. It's raspy and angry. It sets in that I shouted at the cuckoo clock, my poor aunt's cuckoo clock. It's like yelling at her. I haven't felt her around in a while, and she hasn't visited my dreams, but I've been seeing myself in the woods again. My dead body standing upright with bugs and mud in my mouth and eyes, holding hands with Death—who is my aunt at the same time too, somehow—and they wave at me. I stare out the window from my bed and can't move but can feel all the pain in my legs, so I lie still and count the stars. I can tell less and less that I'm dreaming.

I've been drinking more, but lately, my dreams have changed, and maybe that's why it helped my aunt so much, that sweet red wine, because my dreams have been fucking bliss. I can hear the crickets and owls and airplanes. Their red and blue lights flicker behind the clouds. The moon is full and close. The sky is deep and *blue*. I move slowly, as does time. I don't have to run from anyone, not even Death. My eyes take in the moonlight, and it shines into my pupils too bright, like the sun. Last night, it gave me a headache, and I stumbled onto my pumpkins on my porch.

Something feels off about that memory. It feels too real. I squint to see out the patio door and I see the crushed pumpkins on the porch—*my* pumpkins from my dream—with their guts gushing out like overflowing cornucopias. I remember now that last night, I woke up *standing* on the patio, barefoot on the cement. Fucking sleepwalking. I've been sleepwalking.

A dream within a dream, I remember suddenly, as if I was really taken back there, back to that fucking moment. *A dream within a dream*, I hear again at the very top of my mind, and I see my student sitting in front of me. I hear myself as a passenger, *Then try to wake up. If this is a dream, try to wake up*, and then I'm sitting on my couch reliving the conversation about lucid dreaming with my client. My voice is a faint echo. *Take control*, and I have the revelation in the blur of memories that I must be blacked out, drunk, maybe, or having an episode, and I freeze in panic. I hear my grandfather and his voice like cymbals, *Take care of yourselves*, and I understand suddenly, all the signs that my unconscious mind has been sending this whole time, maybe since childhood, that I've been dreaming. It's all been a dream, a dream within a dream, and I need to wake up, because I feel in the back and forefront of my mind that Tonight is The Night.

Thank you for visiting my unconscious.

I look out the window, to my own man at the edge of my driveway, to Death at the edge of the woods, and I finally take control.

THAT NIGHT

I woke up before dawn on November 1st. I dreamt I heard her voice, calling for me and repeating “TONIGHT,” so I drove to her house in my robe wide-awake, half-asleep, wishing over my steering wheel that I was still dreaming.

I used the spare key. The TV was still on. Her patio door was wide open, letting in the October chill. Her footprints were scattered in the sand. I followed them. She must have been sleepwalking.

“JOSEPHINE!” I called out into the blue morning light. It started to drizzle, then pour. “JOSEPHINE!”

“BENNY?”

She sounded just like in my dream, and then I saw her, standing still at the edge of the woods in her white robe.

I called for her again, “JOSEPHINE!” but she disappeared behind the sheets of rain and into the curtains of trees.

I found her body on a boulder, all scratched up and in the rain. She must have slipped and fell. She must have been dead for hours. She wrote in her journal, “Tonight is The Night. *THAT* night. *THIS NIGHT*. Tonight. Tonight. *TONIGHT*,” over and over again. I touched the page for a long time.

And I brought the cuckoo clock home with me. It wakes me from my nightmares and reveries and reminds me of the time when I’ve lost track of the days completely.

BENNY?

Sometimes, I still hear her. She’s all I dream about. I dream she watches me through the window from the edge of the woods and her shadow terrifies me. Sometimes, she takes a step forward. A single step.

BENNY?

But it’s been different lately. Lately, in my dreams—in my *wildest* dreams—I see her walking up my driveway, calling for me and smiling with her teeth, and then she knocks on my door like Death himself. And I open it.

Josephine.

It feels so real, and we kiss, for the first time in a long time.

And she tastes like tea and honey.

